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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [AORC](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: FOREIGN MINISTER CONVOKES PERM 5
AMBASSADORS FOR DIALOGUE ON HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

REF: COLOMBO 322

¶1. (SBU) In a bid to show that briefings to the UN Security Council on Sri Lanka are not needed, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohita Bogollagama convoked the Ambassadors of the permanent members of the Council, Japan and India for a dialogue on March 25 with Senior Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa and other key ministers on the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka. Minister Samarasinghe detailed improvements to IDP screening and registration, IDP camp demilitarization and access, and freedom of movement. Presidential Advisor Rajapaksa promised two IDP camps in Mannar would be closed by April 30, while an additional 1,000 metric tons of food would go to the IDPs in the safe zone within the next two weeks. Foreign Secretary Kohona expressed concern that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had greatly exaggerated the extent of civilian casualties in her statement of March 13. Ambassador responded that numerous credible reports from within the safe zone as well as repeated ICRC evacuations of civilians with shrapnel wounds corroborate UN reports of significant civilian casualties from shelling. Rajapaksa welcomed a proposed visit by UN Special Rapporteur for IDPs Walter Kaelin. End Summary

Responding to Holmes Suggestions

¶2. (SBU) Bogollagama opened by stressing the importance of dialogue and noting the GSL's appreciation of the work of the UN and ICRC. At Bogollagama's suggestion, Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Samarasinghe explained that the GSL welcomes constructive suggestions from the international community. He highlighted that 52,000 civilians from the north have crossed into Government-controlled areas where they are now being cared for in interim camps until they can be resettled. He detailed the following measures the GSL has taken to respond to suggestions made by UN U/SYG John Holmes:

- The GSL had put in place more transparent screening and registration procedures for IDPs once they come into government-controlled areas. (Note: Samarasinghe did not provide specifics.)
- The GSL had reduced military presence in the interim camps and the Ministry of Relief Services has assumed over-all responsibility for the camps.
- The GSL has significantly improved access to the camps so that UN agencies and their "their preferred NGO partners" enjoy free access and work side-by-side with the GSL.
- The GSL was working to put in place a system of ID cards that would allow IDPs greater freedom of movement in and out of the camps. Indian High Commissioner Prasad welcomes measures to provide greater freedom of movement and suggested that the GSL allow postal and phone services to enable IDPs to communicate with loved ones and friends. Basil Rajapaksa responded that internet and postal services already exist in several of the camps, while the GSL is working to provide phone service. He remarked that since most IDPs have no funds, the GSL is prepared to finance some calls per month, per family, but has not yet figured out who can pay for the balance.

13. (SBU) Ambassador asked what arrangements were being made to accommodate new IDPs since existing camps already are overcrowded. Basil responded that the GSL needs the help of the UN to get new camps ready. The GSL itself has 15 camps

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and is building more temporary camps. The UNHCR also is building more camps. But Basil urged the Ambassadors to suggest to the UN that the UN fund local Sri Lanka NGOs to help build more camps since these NGOs have extensive experience from the tsunami. Ambassador suggested that since many areas of Mannar reportedly were ready for resettlement, the GSL might begin resettlement right away to those areas to relieve crowding. Rajapaksa responded indirectly by saying that two camps already in Mannar would be closed by April 30 (comment: this would be welcome since the residents of these camps have been in near-detention conditions for well over a year). Ambassador also noted that demining had been slowed by the failure of the Defense Ministry to approve demining NGOs and their staff for work in Mannar. Rajapaksa responded that the MOD had now approved such NGOs.

14. (SBU) Ambassador asked about reports of disappearances from the camps that some had alleged were abductions by the many paramilitaries operating in Vavuniya. Rajapaksa expressed surprise at such reports, noting that all IDPs are registered before entering the camps so it should be easy to determine if any have disappeared. He requested specifics which Ambassador undertook to provide. (Note: such reports came from a recent EU Mission to the camps. Embassy has asked the EU to share its information with the government).

Food and Medicine for Safe Zone -----

15. (SBU) The Commissioner General for Essential Services reviewed recent GSL efforts to provide food and medicine to the safe zone (reported in embassy sitreps). He said the President had directed that an additional 1,000 metric tons of food, vegetables, powdered milk, and vegetable oil be delivered to the safe zone well before the Tamil and Sinhala New Year's celebration on April 13 and 14. Rajapaksa added that the GSL was determined to provide sufficient food and would approve any other items that could not be used for military purposes by the LTTE.

Shelling -----

16. (SBU) Noting that the Ambassador and several other

Ambassadors had expressed concern over Sri Lankan military shelling of the safe zone, Bogollagama asked the Sri Lankan Army Director of Operations to brief on Sri Lankan military operations in and near the safe zone. After reviewing the military's progress in reducing the area controlled by the LTTE, the Director emphasized that local commanders were prohibited from firing artillery into the safe zone. Nonetheless, the LTTE continued to fire artillery out of the safe zone and use civilians as human shields. He repeated that the Sri Lankan military is taking "utmost care" to avoid civilian casualties. Ambassador thanked the Director for his assurances. Ambassador noted that the U.S. and most other countries are well aware that the LTTE has prevented civilians from leaving the safe zone, in some cases by shooting them, has forcibly recruited children as young as twelve years old, and has placed heavy weapons amongst civilian populations. Nonetheless, it is of the utmost importance that the army exercise maximum restraint and not fire into the safe zone, both because of the large number of casualties that have resulted, but also because such casualties gave the LTTE propaganda opportunities to push for cease-fires or political negotiations while undercutting U.S., Norwegian and other efforts to pressure the LTTE to release the civilians.

17. (SBU) Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona expressed concern

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that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had greatly exaggerated the extent of civilian casualties in her statement of March 13. He said that UN statements that 2/3 of documented casualties since late January had occurred in the no fire zone were false. He said that government, with the assistance of the ICRC, has evacuated by sea and other means 4,120 sick and injured persons. The UN's figure of 7,241 injuries to civilians could not therefore credibly be established. Why were there no pictures of casualties, he asked? Turning to the Ambassador, he questioned the source of the UN and other reports of extensive civilian casualties.

18. (SBU) Ambassador responded that the UN could speak for itself, but that numerous credible independent sources inside the safe zone provided daily reports and that the UN did not rely on TamilNet figures which were often exaggerated. The Ambassador also pointed out that many of the 4,120 evacuated by the government and ICRC had shrapnel wounds, a clear sign of artillery and mortar use in the safe zone. Kohona suggested some of those might be from the LTTE shelling its own people to frame the government. Ambassador acknowledged that possibility, but also said that relations between the civilians and the LTTE were already fragile as a result of the shootings that had already taken place of those attempting to escape. Civilians in the safe zone would know if the shells came from within the safe zone and would further agitate against the LTTE if this were so.

Improved Media Access

19. (SBU) Ambassador and other representatives suggested that if the GSL is confident its own military is not shelling the safe zone, it should allow independent media into the safe zone. Rajapaksa responded that teams from the BBC and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation would be traveling up the A9 to visit the front lines on March 26. He promised to consider carefully future requests for media access to the safe zone with the understanding that the GSL obviously could not guarantee their safety given the LTTE's presence.

Kaelin Visit

110. (SBU) In the same spirit of transparency, Ambassador noted that the UN Special Rapporteur for IDPs Walter Kaelin had sought GSL approval to visit as soon as possible.

Ambassador remarked Kaelin's visit could help the GSL address any lingering problems with the camps in Vavuniya, after which Kaelin could issue a public statement with his assessment of conditions. Such a statement would help the GSL to counter claims that the Vavuniya camps are "concentration camps" and would help encourage the LTTE to let the civilians go from the safe zone. Basil Rajapaksa said Kaelin would be welcome. Ambassador subsequently conveyed this to the UN Mission in Colombo.

BLAKE